

Introduction

The wetlands of Gunbower Island are a unique and diverse wonderland of waterbirds, wildlife and aquatic plants and are recognised as Wetlands of International significance by the Ramsar Convention. Wetlands act as a filter for the water system ensuring a clean and consistent flow of nutrients throughout the system, similar to the kidneys in the human body. From the smallest of insects or plant to the largest of the Red Gums, all parts of the wetland are essential in maintaining the diversity and richness of these waters.

Getting There

Gunbower Island is situated near Cohuna 240km north of Melbourne, on the Murray River.

The Gunbower Island Canoe Trail is located south of the Koondrook Township, about 25km north of Cohuna.

To get there from Melbourne you can take the Calder Hwy (A79) into Bendigo and travel up the Loddon Valley Hwy (B260) to Kerang where you take the Kerang-Koondrook Rd (C264) into Koondrook. Alternatively you can travel up the Hume Freeway (M31) where you turn left onto the Northern Hwy (B75) to Echuca. From there you travel west along the Murray Valley Hwy (B400) into Cohuna, and then turn right onto the Cohuna-Koondrook Rd, which will take you to Koondrook.

Canoe Trail Details

The canoe trail is a return route of approximately 5km and will take about 2 hours to complete. Red triangular markers mark the trail. Numbered signs along the trail correspond to the numbers on the map. Upon reaching Number 8, take some time to explore the wetlands before returning along the trail at your leisure.

The trail is suitable to paddle at any time of the day or night, however take into account the following points:

- Wildlife is more active at sunrise and sunset.
- Duck hunting may occur in this area between March and June. For further info contact DSE's Customer Service Centre on 136 186.
- Creek levels may be too low for paddling between May and August. Contact DSE's Cohuna office (☎ 03 5456 5555) for further information

In wet weather or during flood times, access to the start of the trail is limited. Contact DSE Cohuna for further information regarding road conditions.

For your safety

The following suggestions are given to help you make your journey a safe one:

- Ensure that your canoe is in good condition and free of leaks.
- Be sure to carry a basic first aid kit with you.

- Always wear a buoyancy vest when canoeing
- Wear adequate footwear.
- Take a snack and plenty of water with you.
- Make sure you are suitably clothed for expected weather conditions.

River Red Gums drop their branches without warning so be careful when canoeing, and remember to leave your car parked in a safe spot.



Safe's Lagoon

1. Ringbarking

Before you begin to canoe, have a look at the dead trees in the picnic area. You will notice that some of these trees have a ring cut into the trunk about two feet up. These trees were ringbarked; a practice where the sapwood is severed to prevent nutrient flow up the tree. Starved of its nutritional source the tree gradually dies.

These trees were ringbarked by forest workers in the late 1800's and early to mid 1900's. The trees selected for ringbarking were the largest of the forest, referred to as 'Bull' trees. They were killed to allow the new trees to grow more abundantly. The result was a denser forest, with smaller trees due to greater competition for sunlight and nutrients. Many of these larger living trees are now recognised as valuable habitat for a variety of animals, and are protected.

2. Canoe Tree

If you look towards the large tree stump behind you, you will notice it has a long oval scar. On the opposite side of this tree there is also a smaller scar. This is referred to as a 'scar tree'. It has been scarred by the removal of an area of bark. Aborigines used this bark for a variety of purposes, including the making of canoes, water carriers and dwellings. Often the bark would be painted with ochre or charcoal to decorate dwellings. Bark twine was used for binding tools as well as for weaving.

Not all trees with scars are the result of aboriginal activity. Those that are, will generally be symmetrical or have parallel sides, and the scars don't reach the ground. Others are scarred due to European activity, where axe marks may be evident, or by natural damage such as insect activity. Throughout the trail there are several trees with smaller scars where aborigines have removed bark to make water carriers. You will need to look around carefully to find these. It is important to protect these trees, and retain this part of Australia's history.

3. Aquatic life

If you sit quietly and watch the dense field of water plants to your left you may be able to observe a variety of water creatures in action. Many small insects will dart busily around, feeding on micro-organisms. You may also see larger insects such as dragonflies busily feeding on these smaller insects. All these creatures are an important part of the wetland, serving as a food source to fish and small birds.

Sometimes in this area you will see the brown backs of carp feeding, and their mouths emerging to gulp air and insects. Carp are an introduced fish brought to Australia from Europe and England. In some parts of the Murray they are thought to muddy the waters when feeding on the bottom, and to compete with and deprive native fish of food. Native fish in this area include; Murray Cod, Golden, Silver and Macquarie Perch.



Canoe Trail along Gunbower Creek

4. Drowned Trees

Throughout Safe's Lagoon and along the Gunbower Creek you will notice that there are many dead trees in the water. These trees have drowned. Irrigation practices have resulted in the areas becoming inundated with water for much longer periods of time than would naturally occur. While the River Red Gum relies on floodwaters for its successful germination, it also requires drier periods and without this the tree dies.

On some trees and on top of many stumps, you will notice new growth. This growth results from seed dispersed by floodwaters implanting themselves on the rich decomposing timber. Much of this growth will not survive the winter frosts and rising floodwaters. On other trees growth may be seen higher up the trunk. Such growth may be coppice growth, where buds in the tree trunk sprout, often as a result of fire.



Swan in flight-Canoe Trail

5. Plant Life

As you look into the wetland vegetation in front of you, you will observe plants on different levels. The closest of these, floating on the water, include the small fern like Red Azola, and the spiky Cat's-Tail. Rushes can be seen behind these, and include Cumbungi with its large oblong seed head, and the Common Rush. Further in grow the Red Gums, on land that floods and then dries out regularly.

Many of these plants adapt to the drying and refilling of the wetland. This process allows for the breaking down of debris with lowering waters and the dispersal of nutrients as water rises. These areas, with their still, nutrient rich waters, provide breeding and nesting grounds for birds, fish and insects. In irrigation areas such as this, diversity of plant and animal life may be decreased due to the prevention of drying and refilling.

6. Tree Hollows

Look around as you continue paddling further into the wetland. You will notice many hollows in the standing dead trees throughout the waters, as well as along the banks of the lagoon. These trees are an important part of the wetland as the hollows make excellent homes for a variety of birds and animals. Small parrots, rosellas, swallows, ducks, cockatoos, bats, owls and small climbing mammals will all find welcome homes here. The swallows can be aggressive birds, often taking over the hollows of other birds.

The trees on land will provide homes to all these creatures, while those surrounded by water will offer homes to those that can fly. During spring many birds will be nesting with their young. If you look closely in surrounding trees you may also see nests among branches.

7. Irrigation

If you look across to the paddocks on your left you will notice that they are far greener than other nearby fields. These hills were originally used for growing tobacco, which was dried in the silver sheds by the river. The property is now used for dairy farming. Irrigation practices have enabled the farmers here to buy water for their property, thus ensuring green pastures through periods when the land would normally be very dry. You may see ibis or spoonbills feeding on insects that rise with the waters on the paddocks.

Irrigation practices have altered the natural flood patterns of these waters. Originally waters would have risen during the heavy spring rains and snowmelts. These waters would have dropped in the warmer drier months. Nowadays, waters are held in the Hume and Dartmouth dams, and released when required. Waters are maintained at high levels from August right through till May. Small weirs along waterways such as that passed when entering the island near Koondrook, allow for more localised regulation.

8. A Bird Sanctuary

Congratulations on reaching the end of the guided section of your journey. This section of the wetlands, with its great stands of rushes and its tranquility, is a haven for breeding and nesting birds. These diverse species of birds are the treasures of the wetlands, many coming from kilometres away to visit this amazing area.

Take some time to go for a paddle around the maze of reeds and rushes, taking care not to disturb or damage wildlife or vegetation. Allow yourself to drift peacefully for a while, listening to the orchestra of birdcalls that will fill your ears. When you are ready to return, follow the trail back to the start. Now that you have had the chance to learn about the wetlands, this is your time to explore, and simply enjoy the paddle home.

Caring for the wetlands

Over half of Australia's wetlands have been permanently destroyed or lost. The wetlands of Gunbower Island have been declared Wetlands of International Significance.

Please help look after them by:

- Taking all your litter home.
- Not disturbing any part of the wetlands.
- Not polluting these waters with detergents or waste.



Royal Spoonbill Canoe Trail

Flooding the Wetlands

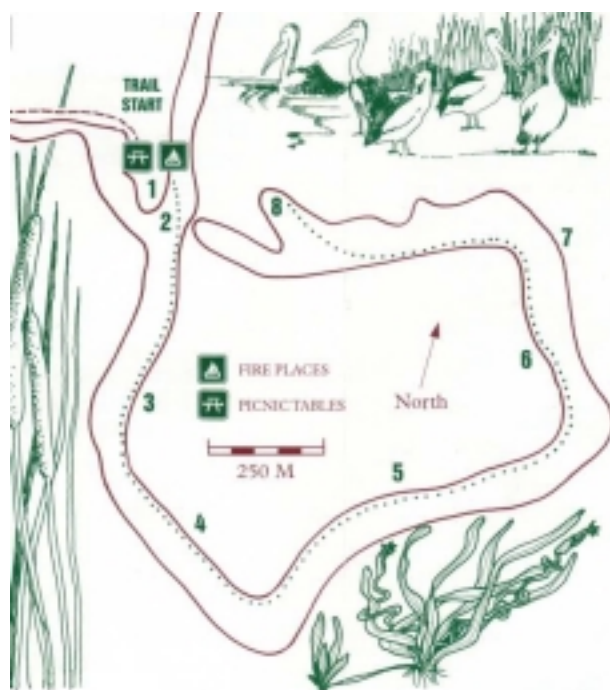
Dry Times: In the drier seasons, the wetlands are home to a variety of land and water animals. The floor of the Red Gum forest is a carpet of meadow grasses such as Warrego, Wallaby Grass and Everlasting. On the waters edge, reeds, rushes and smaller water plants are abundant.

There are a wide variety of animals to be found in these times. Kangaroos, emus, foxes, birds, snakes, goannas and lizards, forage throughout the grasses and on the water edge. In these drier times, organic matter containing nutrients essential to the vitality of the wetlands, is broken down.

Flood Times: As flood waters enter the wetlands, this organic matter is dispersed throughout the waters providing a rich source of food for many waterbirds, fish and other aquatic animals, helping them to reproduce. A visitor to the flooded plains will observe an amazing variety of nesting birds and many young aquatic creatures. Both these dry and flooded times are essential in ensuring a healthy wetland.



Canoe Trail along the Gunbower Creek

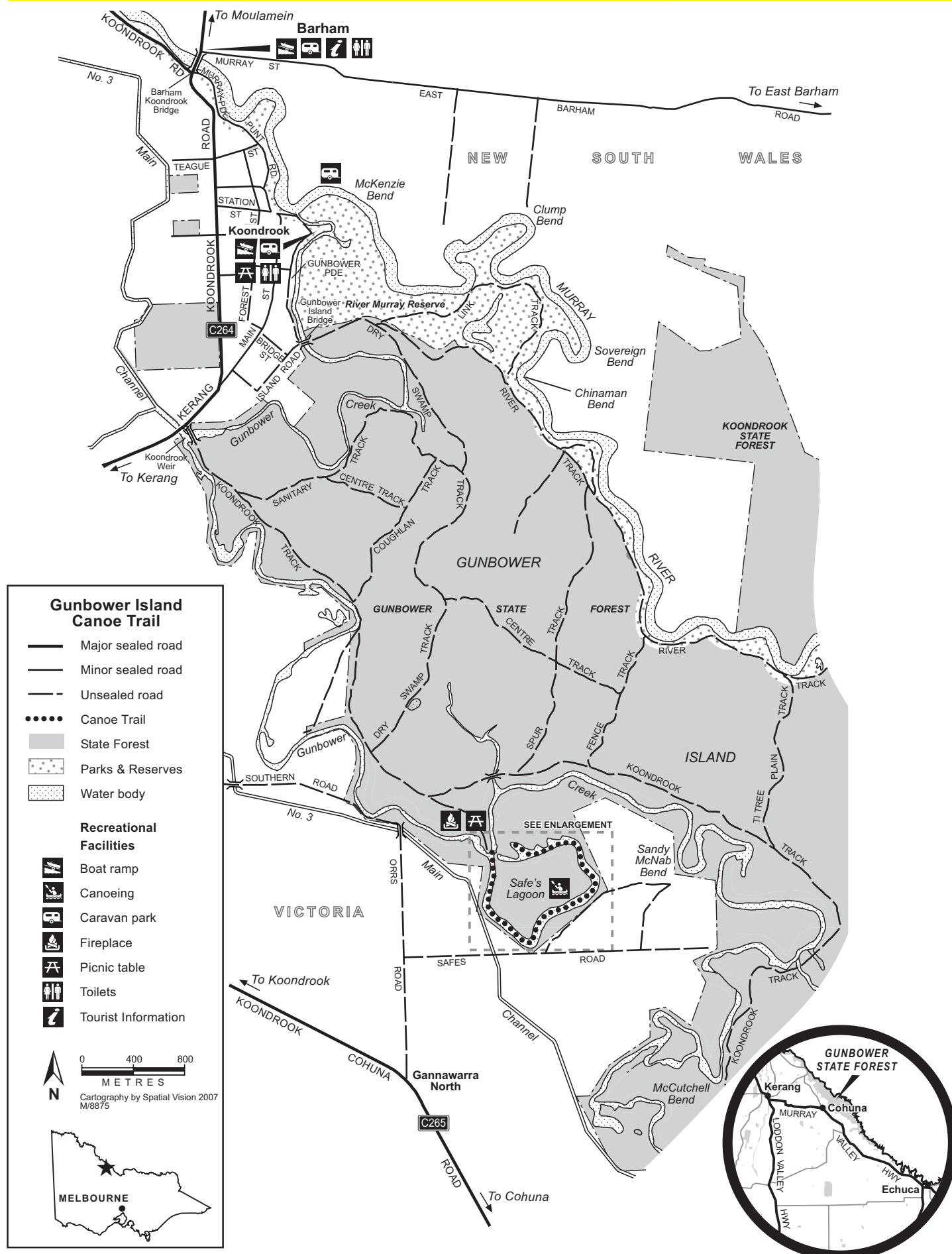


Map of Gunbower Island Canoe Trail

For more information

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is responsible for managing Victoria's State Forest. For further information contact DSE's Customer Service Centre on 136 186 (TTY: 1800 122 969) or visit DSE's website at <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/forests>

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